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ABSTRACT

This short book gives an overview of a curriculum plan, a plan to develop the kind of learners that young children should become. The purpose of this self-directed learner curriculum is to help parents and educators guide young learners so they become capable, purposeful, responsible citizens. It provides an outline of the steps needed to develop the attitudes, skills, and knowledge that will serve children across the years. After an introduction, the "Round Pegs in Square Holes" section of the book discusses beliefs and principles of self-directed learning and the meaning of "developmentally appropriate." The next section, "Images of the Self Directed Learner," offers two brief "images" (vignettes) of how parents and other caregivers can encourage self-directed learning; advice on fostering a self-directed learner; and characteristics of the self-directed learner. The remainder of the book outlines the self-directed learner curriculum, and discusses habits of mind, skills that make learning possible, knowledge that supports growth, and using personal narratives. (RS)

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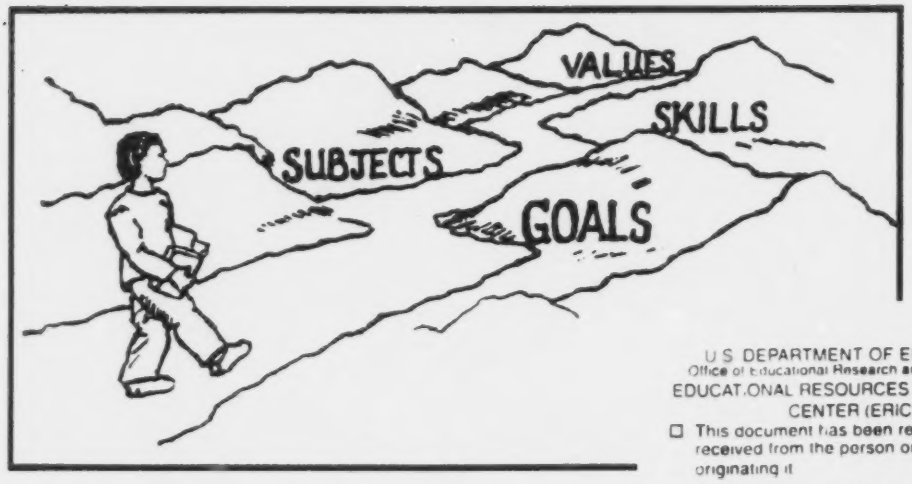
The Self-Directed Learner



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FAMILY LEARNING ASSOCIATION

HELPING CHILDREN TO LEARN SERIES

The Self-Directed Learner

by Carl B. Smith

Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication

&

The Family Learning Association

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Carl B. Smith, Director
and
The Family Learning Association
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Bloomington, IN 47401

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ERIC/REC Advisory Board

Douglas Barnard
Associate Superintendent
of Instruction
Mesa Public Schools
549 North Stapley Street
Mesa, AZ 85203

Joan Irwin
Director of Publications,
International
Reading Association
800 Barksdale Road
PO Box 8139
Newark, DE 19714-8139

Neyland Clark
Superintendent,
Kay County Schools
Cape Girardeau S. D. #63
61 North Clark
Cape Girardeau, MO 63701

Robert Pavlik
Professor of English Education
Cardinal Stritch University
6801 North Yates Road
Milwaukee, WI 53217

James Gaudino
Executive Director, National
Communication Association
5105 Backlick Road, Building E
Annandale, VA 22003

Lenore Sandel
Editor, ASCD Whole
Language Newsletter
33 Sherman Avenue
Rockville Center, NY 11570

Earlene Holland
Associate Director, Office of
Program Development
251 East Ohio Street,
Room 229, State House
Indianapolis, IN 46204

Faith Schullstrom
Executive Director, National
Council of Teachers of English
1111 W. Kenyon Road
Urbana, IL 61801

Josefina Tinajero
Director, Mother and
Daughter Program
University of Texas
500 West University Avenue
El Paso, TX 79968

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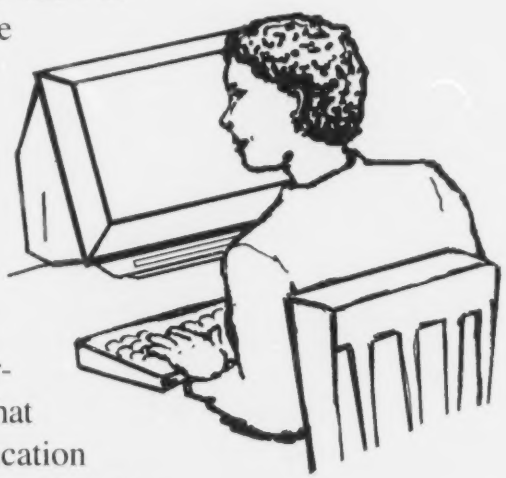
Preface: A Savvy Kid

My fifteen-year-old nephew sent me an e-mail message from the campus of a well-known university. He was attending a summer camp and needed special information to help him compete in a debate. "Could you find references for me and the one article that I need? I can't locate them here. Please send them back by e-mail because my debate plan must be ready in three days."



Daniel wrote to me because a year earlier I had shown him that I could search for education documents on the education database called ERIC. He had forgotten the name of the database, but he felt certain that I had not. Now he needed education documents and thought I might help him. I did.

This minor event serves as a splendid preface to the concern of this report—The Self-Directed Learner. Daniel had traveled from his home in Dallas, Texas, to Michigan to participate in a five-week debate camp. When most of the boys his age were going to football or basketball or soccer or tennis camps to develop their

physical skills, this kid decides to improve his debate skills. Just to get into the camp he had to prove that he already had experience and skill in debating.

Daniel personally determined that he wanted to go to a summer debate camp, researched the few camps that operate, convinced his parents, prepared the qualification documents to prove that he was up to camp standards, made the travel arrangements, and knew enough to look for specialized help on one of his debate topics. That is a clear example of a self-determined and a self-directed learner—at age fifteen.

Because of the characteristics that my nephew displayed in his summer camp experience, I am confident that he will grow and thrive in the complex world ahead of him. Our more important question should be: How do we guide our children to become self-directed learners who will face the future with confidence? This book gives parents and teachers the principles and the steps they need to answer that question. This book provides you with practical steps to get you started, and we hope it stimulates your creative energies to devise an environment and applications that work for your children.

We also challenge parents and teachers to continue to explore means to develop self-directed learners by sharing their own experience. You may join an electronic discussion by looking at the web site **kidscanlearn.com**. Please join, learn, and contribute.

Introduction

This short book gives an overview of a curriculum plan, a plan to develop the kind of learners that we want our children to become. The purpose of this self-directed learner curriculum **is to guide young learners so they become capable, purposeful, responsible citizens.**

We maintain that the overall goal of schooling is to help learners determine their purposes, to find the information they need to make informed decisions, to function as responsible citizens, and to engage in thoughtful dialogue with others.

Though our youth may have additional objectives for schooling, we hope that they learn to be self-directed, that they develop the purposes, the attitudes, and the skills to act reasonably in school and in life. As parents and teachers, we need to adopt an educational program that guides children to those ends.

In this book you will find an outline of the steps needed to develop the attitudes, skills, and knowledge that will serve your children across the years.

Attitudes

The self-directed learner isn't an overconfident loner. Rather he or she realizes that they have valuable questions to ask and that they know where to go to find the answers, whether alone or in cooperation with others.

Skills

Skills are here defined as those learned behaviors that enable a person to function almost automatically, for example, in reading, computing, writing, studying, public speaking. Thus the learner develops decoding skills, spelling skills, basic math facts, note-taking skills, speaking skills, and similar skills as a means for gaining personal competence for school and for a career. These various skills may be applied for gathering information, making decisions, arguing issues, enjoying leisure, and so on.

Knowledge

A person cannot become a critical thinker unless he has sufficient knowledge to make decisions, to distinguish between the good and the bad, between the beautiful and the not so beautiful. One cannot solve a problem without having enough information to apply to the targeted issue. One cannot draw valid conclusions without information on which to base those conclusions.

Literature, mathematics, sciences, history, community experience, observations about nature—all give knowledge that we use to reflect, to inform, to

criticize, to organize our perception of the world. Without adequate knowledge, we cannot act as self-directed learners. We must have knowledge to enable us to move in purposeful directions.

Strategies

Besides attitudes, skills, and knowledge, the self-directed learner also needs to develop the thinking strategies that enable her to focus problems and to reformulate issues in order to arrive at solutions. This learner will know how to set purposes, to monitor understanding, to organize, to summarize, and to follow a plan.

This book outlines a curriculum that will lead your children to become self-directed learners.

Round Pegs and Square Holes

More and more people are challenging today's schools. They feel that the curricular and extracurricular experiences provided in most of our schools are moving children in an inappropriate direction.

Why are we parents and teachers deeply concerned about what our children are learning? Why are we concerned about the school curriculum? Two reasons: one, we realize that what our children learn will affect their school lives and their careers; two, we know that the world around us changes rapidly. Understandably, we want our children to succeed, and we want to assure them that they will have the knowledge and the skills to do so in a changing world.

In his book *Working*, Studs Terkel interviewed people to see what they liked about their jobs. For each category of job that he examined, he described a satis-

fied person and a dissatisfied person. For example, he portrayed Rip Torn as a well-known but bitter actor versus a little-known actor who was quite happy with his work. One of the workers that Terkel interviewed had been building stone walls for forty years, and he seemed to be the happiest person that Terkel had found.

Terkel wanted his readers to conclude that happiness was being a round peg in a round hole; dissatisfaction resulted from being a round peg trying to fit into a square hole. Probably the round-peg-square-hole concept of career advice doesn't work neatly in today's changing workplace. Futurists predict that young people entering the job market today will make at least five career changes in their working lives. Probably the best preparation for five careers is to learn how to learn.

All the more reason for us to think about the curriculum that prepares our children for a life of change, to ask questions, to search for new ideas and new associations, and to act as self-directed learners throughout their lives. Their satisfaction will emanate as much from learning as it will from the specifics of their careers.

Beliefs and Principles

When we say that we must change to meet future realities, we are stating our belief that the future will be different. What other beliefs do we have about learning that will guide us in coaching our children as they step into the future? Our beliefs might include some of the following:

1) Learners need to pose their own questions and to hypothesize their answers in all subject areas.
2) Learners should test their ideas on others in order to refine them.
3) Language is central to thinking. Through language, learners establish a base, a common platform. They use language as a means for refining ideas and resolving conflicts.
4) As a learning strategy children need to share their background on a topic, pose common questions as well as personal ones, collaborate in their search for answers, and record their journey towards resolutions.

Operating under these beliefs, children will want to learn language, want to expand their knowledge, want to communicate effectively, and will find joy in watching themselves learn.

Principles of Learning

Our beliefs need to be translated into action, not specific behaviors but into principles that will guide the way that we approach learning. Consider these principles for learning:

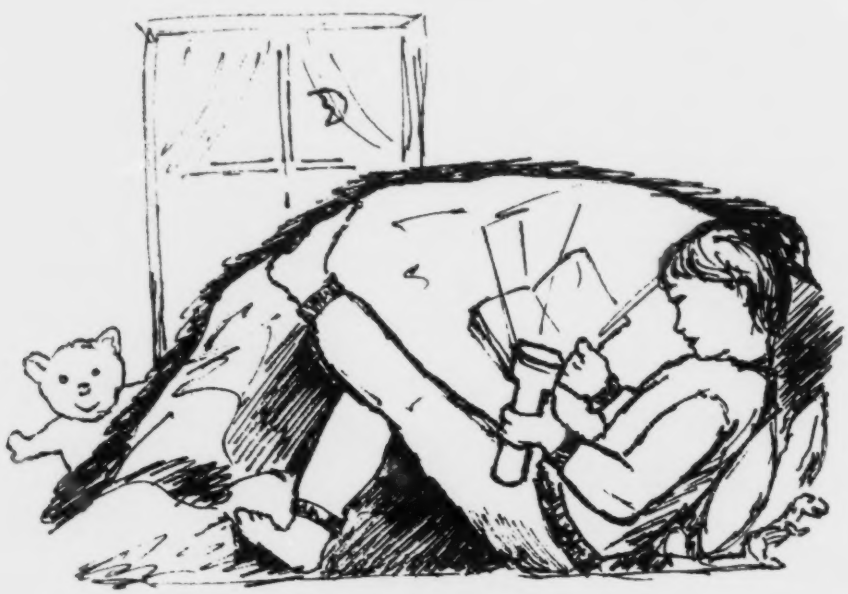
- Learning is the process of making sense of the world.
- What students learn is heavily dependent on their previous understanding, their attitudes toward learning, the ways they perceive and organize the world, and their current context.
- Learning is personal; it begins with personal purposes and questions.
- Learning requires experimentation, risk taking, and error correcting.
- In a school setting, learning requires numerous resources and materials, such as books, computers, and practice centers.
- To reduce ambiguity and uncertainty, learners seek to establish order by recognizing patterns or strategic principles. They construct guidelines that give them a sense of control. Spelling patterns and text structures, for example, help learners acquire this sense of control.

- ✧ Learning requires feedback both to reinforce and to test hypotheses. Assessments should provide useful feedback to learners.

- ✧ Language proficiency occurs through frequent and diverse practice in functional settings.

- ✧ Language growth is developmental; that is, vocabulary, syntactic complexity, and forms of expression expand over a lifetime. Experience, cognitive skills, and personal interests prompt development.

You may want to post these principles to remind you daily of the guidelines you will use in working with your children.



What is Developmentally Appropriate?

We strive to provide experience, books, and challenges that are appropriate for the age and stage of development of our children. The term *developmentally appropriate* is used by all instructional approaches, but the connotations are different. In an interest-based approach, *developmentally appropriate* implies a lot of personal choice. The teacher may organize activities that are within the developmental range of her students, then students choose the activities they feel suit their needs.

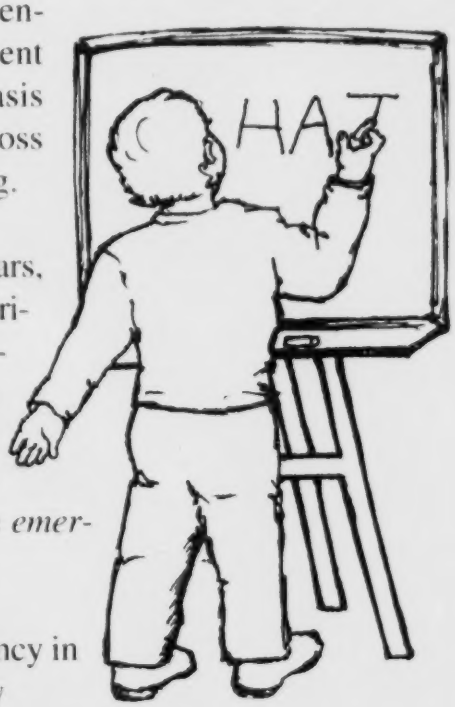
A good example of an interest-based approach is found in the concept called *emergent literacy*. This refers to the gradually developing sense of literacy that young learners have as they experience reading and writing at home and in the neighborhood. As they see signs, hear books read aloud, scribble on paper, tell each other stories, and begin to make sense out of the print world, they become more and more literate. It is both a stage of development and a way of describing the effect that our print-heavy environment has on children.

Parents and teachers contribute to children's emergent literacy by filling the environment with books and writing. Children then choose to focus on some and ignore others. Through these natural exposures to language and books, children gradually learn how to be readers and writers as we have traditionally defined those terms.

In a structured learning environment called *directed teaching*, developmentally appropriate tasks refer to those concepts and skills that have been observed in typical children of a given age. Those concepts and

tasks can then be scheduled, so they provide benchmarks or guidelines for teachers and students. These developmentally appropriate tasks represent an attainable level of proficiency that students can work to achieve. For example, learning to spell and write the words for the primary colors is appropriate in grade one.

Some schools plan a curriculum based on the stages of reading and writing development, then organize learning activities around the major theme of each stage. These developmental stages are: the "emergent literacy stage," the "skilled reader/writer stage," and the "critical thinking stage." These are not distinct categories, but they do help us to conceptualize a developmental program. During the emergent literacy stage, for example, learners are also developing reading and writing skills and making judgments about what they observe and read. The developmental labels simply represent major changes in emphasis in language learning across many years of schooling.



During their early years, learners observe and experiment with language, becoming acquainted with its various forms and its fundamental purposes for communication—the *emergent literacy stage*.

As learners gain fluency in reading and writing, they

learn print conventions, such as the characteristics of reading and writing narratives, descriptions, arguments, charts and graphs, and so on. This is called the *skilled reading/writing stage*.

Learners later become increasingly aware of how people organize their thoughts, of applications to real life, and of ways that language affects the perception of the listener or reader. This is called the *critical-thinking stage*.

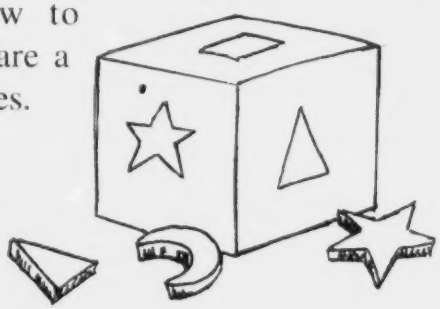
Of course, it is folly to think that the only learning that happens during a particular period of time is represented by the key words *emergent*, *skilled*, or *critical*. These terms are to provide instructional direction. Skills, fluency, and critical thinking may occur during each stage in a child's development. The labels indicate a curriculum emphasis, not a limitation. A child's early years are spent trying to figure out how print works and what books are for. Later years are increasingly concerned with the effectiveness of communication and the value of ideas.

Children gradually expand their awareness of how print fits into their lives. They, like all of us, are always practicing and thinking, sometimes critically, and they define themselves as more proficient language users as they refine their skills. These developmental refinements are also characteristic of learning to play a sport or of developing a relationship, like being a parent.

Developmentally appropriate tasks help children acquire the attitudes and proficiencies that will serve them in school and in daily life. They also remind us adults that we all learn to crawl before we walk and run.

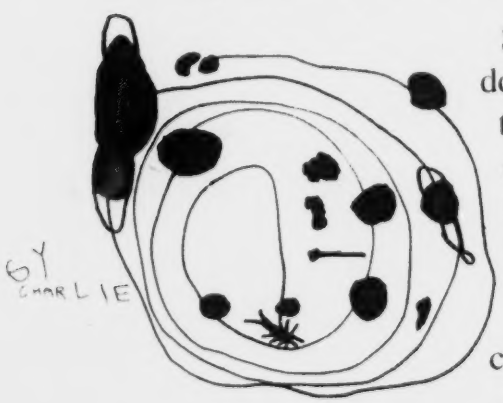
Images of the Self-Directed Learner

We need to construct images of what a self-directed learner does. Then we have a better idea of how to guide each child. Here are a couple of beginning images.



Charlie and the Solar System

Charlie came home from kindergarten and announced that he had learned all about the solar system that day. "Tell me about it," said his mother. And he began to rattle off all the things that came to his mind about orbiting planets around the sun, including some of their names.



Suddenly Charlie became downcast. "We are supposed to draw a picture of the solar system for you, but I have forgotten some of the names."

"Where do you think we can find the names of the

planets?" asked Mom. So they began to look in the encyclopedia for pictures and the names of the planets. Charlie then could draw his picture of the solar system and could label each planet with its name. More importantly, Charlie learned that there is a method for looking up answers to the questions that arise in school and in life. After that introduction to the encyclopedia, he turned frequently to similar references for specific answers and to expand his knowledge.

Wisely, Charlie's mother used his question as an opportunity to teach him that he could find answers on his own if he knew where to look.

Nicole's Christmas Book

Nicole's Grandpa gave her a book for Christmas. She had just started the first grade, and Grandpa thought he would give her something to read right now. Together they sat down to read this new book.

They talked about the pictures in the book and Nicole described what she thought was happening in the story based on the pictures. "Well," said Grandpa, "let's read the story to see if you are right. I'll read a page then you read a page."

Grandpa began reading about the happy woman who drove a school bus. When Nicole began reading she came soon to a directive the school bus driver gave to the kids: "Stand behind the line." Pointing to the word "stand," Nicole said, "I don't know that word. I don't think we have read that word in school."

"Do you know this word?" Grandpa asked, pointing to the word "and" in a sentence that began: "The boys and the girls..."

Nicole pronounced the word correctly but still was unable to make the transfer to "stand." She did not seem to know how to get started.

Grandpa took a sheet of paper and wrote the following words in a list

With a sheet of paper he covered the beginning consonants leaving "and" showing in all spots. "What do you see?"

"And."

One by one he uncovered the first letter in each word, pronouncing it and asking Nicole to pronounce the word, too. "Many words sound something like other words. When you are stuck, this may be a way for you to start figuring out what the unknown word is. But first you need to learn how to sound out the letters that you see at the beginning of the words."

You are in charge

These two simple examples point to situations that lead to self-directed learners. In each case the adult helped the child see that there are ways to find answers, that there are skills that can be applied to solving the common situations that arise in daily learning.

Gradually, the child realizes that he or she is in charge of learning. With regular guidance from teachers and parents, the child begins to ask: "How can I get the job done? What do I need to know and what do I need to do?"

The adult guides the child by regularly asking:

What do you think?

What information do you need?

Where can you find the resources that you need?

Did you resolve that question with a satisfactory answer?

When the learner cannot answer one of those questions, the adult offers advice or direction:

Here's what I would do.....

Why don't you (we) give it a try.

The calm and consistent approach of placing responsibility on the learner's shoulders first will gradually pay dividends as the learner gains skills and builds confidence: **"I truly am in charge."**

"Developing a self-directed learner cannot be reduced to a mind game. Learners need a sense of how to proceed and must acquire knowledge before they can realistically feel the power of learning independently."

Before the child can solve certain math problems, that child needs to know the facts, functions, and operations that lead to a solution. Before a child can discuss the major causes of the Civil War, that child needs to know what social and economic conditions pressed down on the combatants and why they reacted as they did. Before a child can read fluently the fourth-grade textbooks she faces, she needs lots of practice in reading during the previous years of schooling.

The self-directed learner does not rely on puffed up statements, such as one we sometimes hear in the popular self-esteem promotions: "I'm great because I say I'm great." Rather, in the Self-Directed Learner Approach, we want each child to say: "I know some important things, and I know how to find help when I don't have the knowledge."

Meanwhile, teachers and parents should keep exploring ways to help children clarify their learning and to give them opportunities to exercise the skills that will make fluent and efficient learners.

Fostering a Self-Directed Learner

Parents regularly ask themselves how they can help their children to succeed—in school, in a job, in life. They know instinctively that they cannot direct their children's lives forever. Children must gradually learn to direct their own destinies.

In a sense, then, home education and schooling both aim at producing a self-directed learner. Parents and teachers want their children to have a sense of personal direction and to know how to move towards their purposes with confidence and with skill.

But how do parents and teachers know what to do to guide children in becoming self-directed learners, self-directed people?

To answer that question we need to examine the makeup of a self-directed learner. What does one look like? Then we can describe more clearly how adults can help children become one.

Characteristics of the Self-Directed Learner

Think of the people you admired in school or in your work life. What made them stand out in your mind? Weren't they the ones who knew what they wanted and seemed to move securely towards achieving their objectives? Didn't they seem to find the resources needed to get the job done? Those folks exhibited the characteristics we assign to a self-directed learner.

The self-directed learner has a sense of purpose. That purpose goes beyond the activity of the moment. Depending on the age and circumstance of the learner, he or she wants to please parents, get good grades, write for a newspaper, build buildings, get into law school, and so on. Those purposes, whether personal ("I want to be the best") or social ("My team relies on me"), give learners a sense of direction, a guidance system that keeps them focused on the target.

The self-directed learner has a repertoire of strategies and skills. Learning and life surround us with complex issues. To face those issues, we need basic skills and complex problem-solving strategies to comprehend what we read, to understand our social environment, to figure out scientific phenomena, to win someone to our point of view.

The self-directed learner has earned confidence. Because the learner has mastered specific skills, he knows he can accomplish things. He has achieved some success, and teachers, parents, or peers have acknowledged his competence. That gives him the

sense that he can continue to make progress and he can handle related tasks.

The self-directed learner can use academic resources. In a sense the learner has an academic toolbox at her disposal. She can use a dictionary, grammar handbook, and other reference sources. She knows where to go for help in making a presentation or in writing a paper.

The self-directed learner receives guidance from teachers and parents. The self-directed learner realizes that adults have experience that will help in understanding new concepts and in connecting one concept to others. The adult can organize learning, coach the learner, challenge the learner, and generally play a positive role in directing the learner towards larger goals and improved performance.

The self-directed learner shares ideas with others and learns from them. Knowledge shared is knowledge expanded. The learner, therefore, seeks peers, siblings, and a network of advisors to share ideas, ask questions, and build on the notion that we are all mutual learners.

The self-directed learner increases satisfaction through achievement. Most learners thrive on knowing that they are making progress. With the help of a teacher or parent, the self-directed learner identifies achievement markers. By reaching these markers the learner gains a sense of satisfaction in knowing that she has reached an objective or in seeing a particular achievement as a step forward.

The Self-Directed Learner Curriculum

The overall goal of schooling is to help learners determine their purposes, find the information or resources they need to make informed decisions, function as responsible citizens, and engage in thoughtful dialogue.

Certainly there are many objectives for education, but our overriding goal is to help youngsters become self-directed learners, that is, to develop the attitudes and the skills to act reasonably on their own purposes. Therefore, as parents and teachers, we should adopt an educational program that guides our youth towards those ends.

What, then, are the attitudes, strategies, skills, and knowledge that may result in a self-determined,

self-directed learner? What makes up a self-directed learner curriculum?

Developing an Attitude: Habits of the Mind

An important part of this curriculum is developing an attitude that serves a lifelong learner. A self-determined learner believes in himself to the extent that he feels he can identify desirable knowledge and he has the skill to learn what he needs to know. Developing this attitude is the first priority of the self-directed learner curriculum.

This personal attitude exceeds mere bravado, a feeling of self-confidence gained through general success in life. The self-directed learner curriculum deliberately molds an attitude that supports the learner in studying school subjects and in exploring knowledge through the daily questions the learner raises.

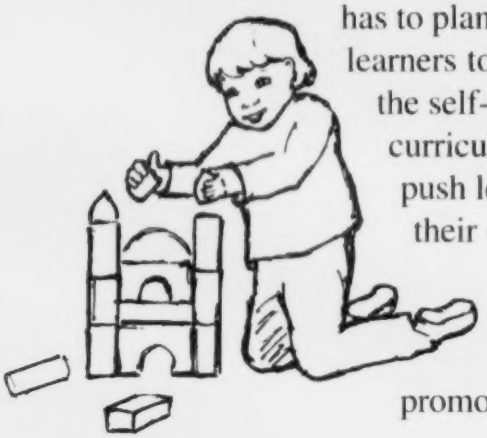
This attitude is best seen as a series of habits of the mind: self-confidence, inquiry, self-monitoring. Through the practice of these habits, the learner develops a self-confidence that allows him to target knowledge and to explore that knowledge with the conviction that he can master it for his own purposes.

In order to see beyond an isolated fact, the learner needs a framework on which knowledge and understanding can be built. Psychologists have used the metaphor of a scaffold to show how the learner integrates new knowledge. Integrated knowledge arises from two energies: information and a mental structure around which personal knowledge can take shape.

Following the same metaphor, we might say that wood studs and bricks are little more than piles of rubble until the builder assembles them according to a blueprint. By using the blueprint, the builder can assemble the studs and the bricks into a house or an office building. So too with bits of data. Without a scaffold, blueprint, or organizing concept, bits of information are mere trivia suitable for a quiz game, but lacking in shape or purpose. In *The Self-Directed Learner Curriculum*, we deliberately lead the learner to those larger concepts that will give her a framework to attach or integrate new data.

Curriculum: Architect and Builder

Eventually, self-directed learners become their own architects and builders combined. Their experience over time gives them the confidence, plans, and skills to move independently in their quest to answer learning questions. In the early stages, however, the learner usually needs an adult guide, a person who can project experiences that will help the learner develop the habits of mind and the skills needed to become a self-directed learner. That doesn't mean that the adult guide or coach has to plan every activity for learners to carry out. Part of the self-directed learner curriculum, in fact, should push learners to devise their own strategies/activities that will lead to the habits and the skills that promote self-determination.



If you want to think of curricula that presently shape the mind of learners, think of experiences that present them with a view of the world. From these experiences they will build their own personal sense of purpose and priority. Young people watch television up to five hours a day. That's five hours a day on a curriculum that very quickly gives them a mental scaffolding for interpreting what they encounter daily. Those views from TV illustrate a world that gives quick fixes to problems, immediate gratification to the senses, intense competition (often involving violence to achieve ends) with clear winners and losers, and lots of suggestive action aimed at sexual pleasure. All of these types of experiences might easily be seen in five hours on any day—soaps, professional sports, action dramas, MTV, etc.

Whether new information comes more from television or from neighborhood activities, children use this new information to build their basic frameworks. Is life actually similar to MTV? It certainly is for the child whose mental scheme has little else for a comparison. Intellectually, we know that mental frameworks not only *can be changed*, but they are dynamic. They are always changing as the learner gathers new information that he or she can then incorporate into that framework.

It should become increasingly evident, then, that adult challenges to the young learner are powerful forces that can move the learner's view of the world in positive directions.

In the next section, we outline the basic components of the curriculum that builds the attitudes, skills, knowledge and personal frameworks so important to a successful person.

General Curriculum Outline

By definition, a curriculum is a set of experiences that lead students to accomplish certain ends. A curriculum usually involves complexities that require new knowledge, changes in behavior, and the building of attitudes or habits.

Here is a broad outline of a curriculum designed to develop a self-directed learner.

The Self-Directed Learner

1. Habits of the mind

1.1 Attitude of self-confidence infused with
- Personal purpose,
- Priorities,
- Earlier success or failure.

1.2 Attitude of inquiry developed through
- Models of asking questions,
- Personal images,
- Pushing beyond the surface.

1.3 Attitude of self-monitoring
- Am I moving in the right direction?
- If not, how can I get back on track?

1.4 Critical reading and thinking
- Analyze the text: What does it say?
- Consider alternatives; don't jump to conclusions.
- Establish criteria; make comparisons.
- Support statements with evidence.
- Make a judgment: What does the text mean?

2. **Skills that make learning possible**
   - 2.1 Reading and writing patterns
     - Phoneme-grapheme patterns
     - Syntax and usage patterns
   - 2.2 Patterns of text organization
     - Narratives
     - Didactic and argumentative texts
   - 2.3 Skills in locating information
     - Using libraries, books, indexes
     - Using on-line searching techniques
     - Refining questions

3. **Knowledge that supports growth**
   - 3.1 Math and science structures and operations
   - 3.2 Historical themes and theories
   - 3.3 Artistic movements and events
   - 3.4 Psychological and spiritual movements

4. **Personal narratives**
   - 4.1 Stories that explain personal life
   - 4.2 Stories that explain history
   - 4.3 Stories that weave together the events of spirit and experience
   - 4.4 Stories that reflect respect, responsibility, and values

1. Habits of the Mind

1.1 Attitude of self-confidence

In order to move forward, take reasonable risks, and accept occasional failure, a person needs an attitude of self-confidence. Learners supported by encouragement, past successes, knowledge, and skills, gain the sense of assurance that tells them they can succeed.

Developing this attitude, this belief in one's own goals, this inner sense of eventual victory requires time and work. In other words, this attitude is a habit of the mind that shapes and strengthens an individual's personality. Self-confidence is the habit that enables a person to select personal educational goals, to give those goals priorities, to pursue them with a reasonable confidence of successful achievement, and to reward oneself with self-congratulations.

Self-confidence, as a habit of the mind, stems from practicing a philosophy that holds that:

1. The learner is driven by personal purpose.
2. The achievement of purpose involves the selection of priorities.
3. Previous successes/ failures shape the boldness or temerity of an individual's attitude about learning.

1.2 Attitude of inquiry

Any parent will testify that young children can drive you crazy with their constant questions: "Why do birds build nests? Why does the moon look orange tonight? Where do babies come from? How do you make a cherry pie?"

Children are full of curiosity. Their minds want answers to the innumerable questions that help them understand the world around them. As they grow into school age, we want to keep that sense of inquiry alive, even though we now want to give it direction and discipline.

It is reported that Albert Einstein became fascinated with a compass that someone gave him as a child. He wanted to know why the needle of the compass changed every time he changed the position of his body. How did that work? What was the force that caused the needle to shift in a northerly direction no matter what direction he turned his body? This simple observation, we are told, led him to try to figure out the physical universe.

Guiding the Learner

When children face the orderly world of school subjects, we want to prompt that same sense of inquiry. Parents and teachers need to challenge children to seek answers beyond their surface observations.

Prompt them to ask how and why, for example:

- How does my body work?
- How does a writer get ideas?

- How does my bike enable me to go faster than I can run?
- Why do people vote for city officers?
- Why do people make laws?
- Why do my friends get sick?

By showing children that their questions are important, we help them build a sense of alertness, a sense that asking questions benefits them in their studies and gradually brings them the satisfaction of understanding.

The attitude of inquiry is the equivalent of flipping a light switch. Once the light shines, we can move more freely; we can target our action; we can get a sense of the organization of the space around us.

If we want children to become self-directed learners, then we must turn on the light to promote an attitude of inquiry.

1.3 Attitude of self-monitoring

A major, recent change in our approach to learning is the realization that the mind is not merely a sponge that soaks up knowledge, later to be squeezed out. A purposeful learner is one who knows where he or she is headed and keeps checking to see that progress is being made. Gone are the days when it was appropriate to tell a learner to keep on trying and keep on reviewing until the information stuck.

Part of the active learner's behavior is to check on his own progress. If he seems to be moving towards fulfilling his purpose and answering initial questions, the learner continues. But if a heavy cloud obscures the learner's view, and if, for example, a reading selection seems to make no sense, then he needs to look for ways to clear things up.

- Are there definitions that will help clarify the written message?
- Should I ask for guidance from a mentor?
- Is this book too difficult for me? Should I look for a book that is written at my level?
- Could I understand the message if I wrote the concepts in my own language?

When students read a text that seems impenetrable, they should consciously recognize this as a problem and know that there are solutions. But since no one else can see what is going on in their heads, the learners themselves must take action.

Guiding the Learner

Parents and teachers can promote this essential learning attitude by engaging students in introspective dialogue:

Mentor: Does the text make sense? Are the ideas clear?

Student: No, it's clear as mud.

Mentor: Are there words you don't understand? Let's see if we can define them? Why don't you look in the glossary? How about the dictionary? Can one of your friends explain a word to you?

Student: But, I still don't understand it.

Mentor: If the text isn't clear after defining the troublesome words, what are your alternatives? How could you find a text that is easier to understand?

Student: I guess I could ask my teacher or a librarian for a clearer book.

Mentor: Exactly. Take charge of your own learning. Reach out and resolve the difficult text as best you can. There are always solutions, but you have to act in your own behalf. Other people will be glad to help you; you just have to let them know what the problem is. By checking on your own learning and by taking steps to unblock your understanding, you are developing the habits of an independent, self-directed learner.

1.4 Critical reading and thinking

In the Disney movie *Pinnochio*, Jiminy Cricket sings a song that advises Pinnochio: "Just let your conscience be your guide." In other words, children have to think for themselves, and look within themselves for the standards they will use to evaluate the world around them. Critical thinking and critical reading follow the same strategy.

A self-directed learner builds an attitude of healthy skepticism, an attitude of personal control over reality.

This attitude manifests itself in primary-grade children when they say to a teasing father, "Oh, come on, Daddy, you know that isn't true." Or, when they admit that they are acting out a fantasy and say: "I'm just pretending, and now you can be the fairy godmother." These childhood admissions tell you that they know the difference, at least to some degree, between reality and make-believe, actually an important step in developing a habit of the mind that we call *critical thinking*.

The attitude of critical thinking expresses the willingness of the learner to test his or her perception of the world against that of another person.

Guiding the learner

Parents and teachers can guide the development of critical thinking in the following ways:

- First, encourage the child to have opinions based on evidence or experience. Routinely ask: What do you think about that? What do you believe is right?
- When responding to reading or to a lecture, make sure that the learner has a reasonable sense of what the text says or what the position of the speaker is.
- Before giving an opposing thought, the learner needs to know what the opposition actually says. What are the main points? Can you compare that text to others you have read?
- Encourage the learner to develop personal standards for making judgments: What makes a book interesting to you? How do you decide to recommend a movie to one of your friends? How do you know when a writer has been persuasive in making his case?
- Prompt the student to apply learning to his or her personal life: What does this mean to you? Can you see ways that these ideas can be applied? What direction does this give you for further reading? Personal behavior? Developing an experiment?

An attitude of critical thinking does not require open cynicism or a sense of negativism. As much as anything, this attitude reflects a person's sense of control over the world of ideas and the world of action. Critical thinking, of course, requires knowledge, the ability to analyze, and practice in making judgments. These are the skills that lift a person out of petty personal prejudice into the power of critical thought, the power of evidence and logic.

2. Skills That Make Learning Possible

Attitudes are important in learning because those habits of the mind give the learner energy and direction. We build those habits across the years of our lives.

Equally important, perhaps more so in curriculum planning, are the technical skills that allow us to keep growing. If someone tells us a story, we can learn from that one story. If we personally have the skills to read, we have the opportunity to learn from all the books available to us. Skills, too, are introduced and fostered across years of learning.

In this section, we examine briefly the skills that enable us to learn more easily—skills of reading, of clear thinking, of locating information, and of using organizing structures.

What we list here is not meant to cover all subjects. We are merely pointing to the value of skills in lifelong learning, and give examples of a few important ones. We expect the parent and the teacher to use this as a stimulus to identify the valuable skills their learners need and to develop the most appropriate explanations and practice opportunities.

2.1 Reading and writing patterns

Basic text skills. Since a large proportion of new information comes to us in writing, we need to develop a high degree of fluency in using the skills that unlock the meaning of written text—sound-spelling patterns, sentence patterns, usage and vocabulary skills, basic organization skills. English writing uses sound-symbol correspondences, so readers need to become skilled in decoding. We usually call these skills *phonics skills*. The ability to recognize sound-spelling patterns enables a reader to identify the words and the message represented on the printed page. But there are more than sound-spelling patterns involved in figuring out a message.

Messages are constructed with sentences. So sentence structure (subject-predicate-object) marked with capital letters and periods figures into the skills a reader needs in order to understand the meaning of a message. Most readers won't have any trouble with simple sentences that are marked with a capital letter and a period at the end, e.g.: *Jane hit the ball.*

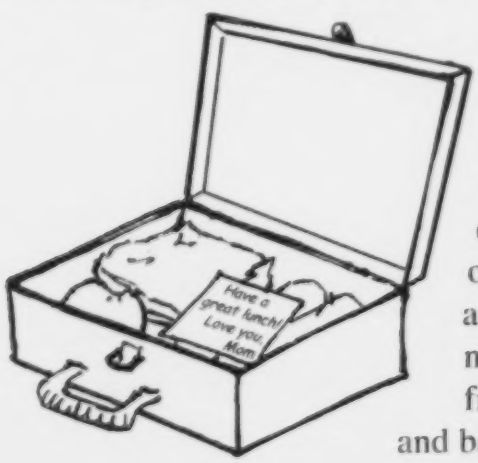
But look at the sentence I found in a newspaper article: "Whether they're in first grade or entering college, an important part of your children's education is to learn about money, investing, and saving." This complex sentence begins with an introductory clause that is set off by a comma ("Whether they're in first grade or entering college,"). Other commas help clarify the meaning of the sentence. All of those indicators help the reader to understand the meaning of the sentence, and the child needs to learn how to deal with them.

So, too, do familiar usage patterns help readers predict the words that are coming next. They may not always reveal the exact printed word, but when someone shouts, "Get out of the way!" a reader hardly needs to pay attention to the last word in the sentence, much less sound it out. The familiarity of the expression triggers the language box in everyone's brain to complete the sentence almost without thinking.

Guiding the Learner

Opportunities for noticing the mechanical skills of English writing and spelling arise daily, even hourly. Children's television often shows sound-spelling patterns as characters sing rhymes and their words appear on the screen. They will point out that the words *dog, doll, dad* all begin with the same letter and sound. Parents can follow that pattern when children ask questions about a word they need help with.

They can also help children think ahead as they read a sentence by pointing out phrases that occur frequently in their everyday speech: *Let's get moving. Have you finished your work? When Grandma calls, tell her you love her.* Hundreds fall out of our mouths with nary a thought. Many of those same expressions appear on the printed page and make it quite natural to transfer from speech to print and back again.



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Just as practice is crucial to becoming fluent in speaking, so does practice play a fundamental role in becoming fluent in using the basic skills of reading and writing. Parents and teachers can use the daily random opportunities to remind children of these skills, but they should also structure practice activities as part of weekly lessons and homework. These practice activities are a means to an end. The goal, of course, is to become a fluent reader and writer, not merely someone who can sound out words.

Here are some practice guidelines:

- When students get stuck on a word, ask them to sound it out or to analyze it.
- Provide regular practice activities in phonics and in spelling to build automatic responses to the common sound-spelling patterns.
- Make practice interesting, even playful: "I'm thinking of a word that rhymes with *fly*. Something you do when you are hurt (*cry*)."
- Whenever possible, relate skills practice to the existing knowledge of the student: "You use that word often when you watch a basketball game (*score*). Listen to the way that it begins. Let's write it and say it slowly as we write it."
- After a practice exercise, have students tell you why they made their choices. For example: "In writing, we mark the end of an idea or sentence with a period, a question mark, or an exclamation mark. Here is a list of sentences. Mark the end of each sentence with one of those marks and tell me why you chose the one you did."

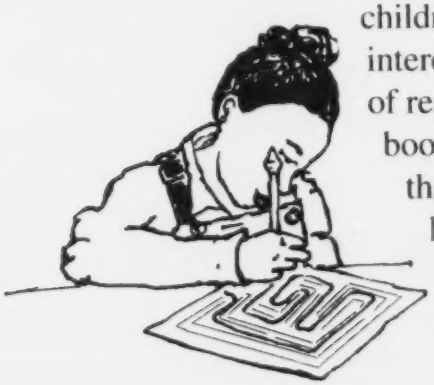
Point out the patterns and the regularities of language to give young children a sense of confidence. We

have conventions for marking our sentences and paragraphs. We have sound-spelling patterns to guide us in reading and writing. We also have organizational patterns in the presentation of information.

Reading and writing are so basic to all learning and to personal independence that we must spend extra, concentrated time in helping children become fluent. By pointing out the way our writing system works and by giving children lots of practice in the skills of reading and writing, we give them a foundation that will serve them throughout life.

You can find abundant resources for building skills and for practicing reading and writing in ways that make sense to children and give them interesting experiences. Look for activity books or software programs that emphasize decoding patterns and that give children ample opportunity to put phonics patterns and spelling words into sentences and into short stories.

You can find sample resources on the web site of the Family Learning Association (***www.kidscanlearn.com***) or at local bookstores, especially those specialty stores that supply teachers and parents with instructional materials. Of course, the library has a wealth of children's books that offer high-interest reading for every level of reader. Ask your librarian or bookstore attendant for books that will serve the reading level and offer the kinds of practice you want for your children.



2.2 Patterns of text organization

As we have indicated before, the human mind naturally searches for patterns that will help make sense of the world or help us live more comfortably. Not that everything in the world is in a neat box, but we more easily understand and remember those ideas and skills that fall into patterns. One of the obvious obligations of a teacher, therefore, is to help learners find and familiarize themselves with the patterns that will help them make sense of their studies.

For example, we use a base-10 math system (10 x 10 =100 and so on). It gives us a means of organizing the computations of everyday life. Scientists help us understand the physical makeup of our material world by showing us compounds, elements, atoms, molecules, and neutrons. Effective teachers and tutors constantly guide their students into seeking these kinds of organizing structures, these mental organizers that reflect reality and help learners build coherence in their knowledge base.

Patterns of Writing

Though not quite as neat as the structure of the physical world, there are text structures that help readers and writers organize ideas and hold them in memory. The most common of these text structures is the story pattern, a narrative.

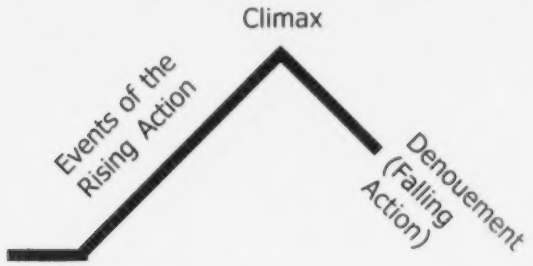
Narrative

In its simplest form, a form that kindergarten and first-grade children can easily understand, a story involves *people/characters trying to accomplish something over time with a result.*

That definition of a story structure may not satisfy high school students or literary critics, but it provides a basic framework for the young reader and writer.

As students become more sophisticated, their sense of story structure can involve more elaborate descriptions: *characters, setting, plot, resolution, etc.* Each of those story elements can be filled out to suit the needs of the rising capabilities of the students. The setting, for example, may include time, place, and social conditions. And the sense of the drama of the story may be enhanced by using terms such as *events of the rising action*, the *climax*, and *falling action* to the *denouement*."

Rising Action Diagram



Introduction:
- *a.* People
- *b.* Place
- *c.* Problem

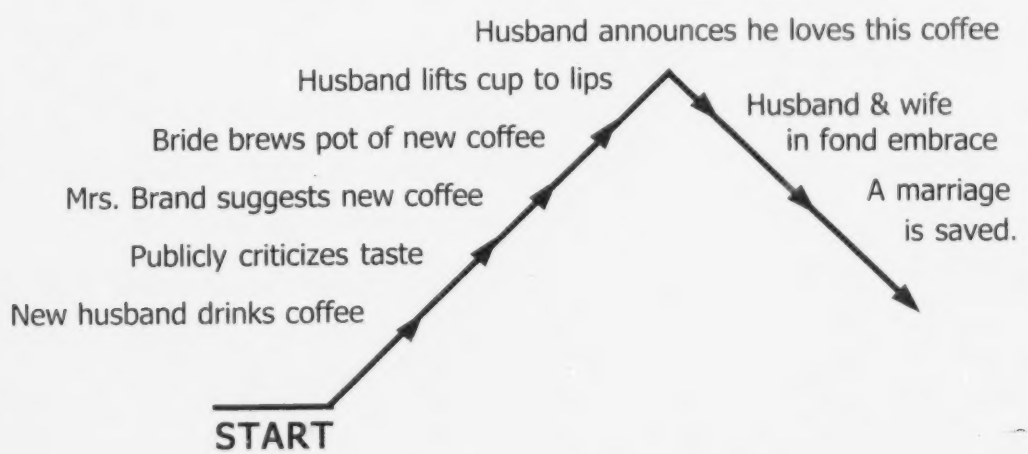
Setting:
- *a.* Time
- *b.* Place
- *c.* Social conditions

Tone: Describe mood, noting keywords

Motif: Ideas or things that keep recurring

Charācters:
- *a.* Physical attributes
- *b.* Behavior exhibited
- *c.* Motivation of behavior (surface motivation for action)
- *d.* Conceit: inner, psychological beliefs, hang-ups

Demonstrate the use of this common narrative structure with videotaped commercials that the students are familiar with. For instance, a popular coffee commercial with a narrative structure.


Husband announces he loves this coffee
Husband lifts cup to lips
Husband & wife in fond embrace
Bride brews pot of new coffee
Mrs. Brand suggests new coffee
A marriage is saved.
Publicly criticizes taste
New husband drinks coffee
START

Function and structure

Look at the list of messages below. They represent text structures or patterns that students may use to read and write their own messages. The list is divided into those that we think are most appropriate for younger children in grades 1-3, for instance, and those that are more appropriate for the upper grades.

Lower Grades	*Upper Grades*
Personal letters	Formal letters
Simple Stories	Complicated stories
Autobiographies	Historical biographies
Simple poetry (jingles, etc.)	Various poetic forms
Descriptions of events	Explanations of events
Opinions	Arguments
Reporting	Research reports
Applications by form	Ads and written requests

This list indicates the variety of purposes and related written forms or structures that are available to educated people. Though not exhaustive, the list points to possible text structures and thought patterns that form one element in the language arts curriculum. Let's further explore the thought processes behind some of these text structures; thought processes that can lead a student into becoming more and more self-determined.

Didactic and argumentative texts

Short stories, novels, autobiographies, and biographies are common examples of the narrative form. Because they are most like the life that students know, they are the easiest to understand and reproduce: **people doing things over time to some result**.

When the writer's intention is to teach, to explain, or to argue a point, then the text structure or the writer's

mental framework can take a variety of shapes. Admittedly, we may find it difficult to identify any structure in some pieces of writing. A rambling opinion piece, for example, may have no shape at all, just a random statement of emotional ideas expressed as they pop into the writer's head.

Description

We hope, however, that serious articles and chapters have a path to follow and that you can reconstruct the article if you decide it benefits you to do so. In a **description** of a resort hotel, for instance, we hope that the writer gives you a perspective, a point of focus, and some orderly way of picturing the resort that will enable you to decide whether or not to use it for your next vacation.

Explanatory texts (Conditions/results)

In an **explanation** of the unprecedented twenty-year period of prosperity that the United States has experienced leading to the year 2000, a writer could point to certain conditions: the economic policies, the fall of the Soviet Union, the rising optimism, and the encouragement of free enterprise. Perhaps the writer can then find a theme that links the conditions and explains the powerful economic engine that has characterized the Eighties and the Nineties. Those conditions, the result of high prosperity, and an orga-

nizing theme give the article its structure and enable the reader to build an understanding for his or her own purposes. This would be a conditions/results pattern.

Cause/effect

Other patterns of thinking and of managing complicated ideas follow the conditions/results pattern. Cause/effect relationships provide us with ways of thinking about everything from physics to human behavior. In physics we learn that for every action there is an equal reaction. It is our way of describing the transference of energy. Energy in motion is not lost, it simply shows up elsewhere. In human behavior, especially when trying to understand harmful behavior, we are always searching for the cause. "What is the cause of my child's persistent misbehavior?"

Problem/solution

In mathematics and in all areas of human endeavor, we regularly think of **problems and solutions** (except for pessimists who think there are only problems). When we become ill, for example, we look for a solution or we go to a doctor who seeks solutions to our problem. The overwhelming number of articles on weight loss and physical fitness show us this thinking and writing pattern. "You are too fat, and my elixir will help you melt off the pounds."

Arguments

These writing patterns are simple in their formulation (conditions/results, cause/effect, problem/solution) even though they may tackle very complex issues. But the construction of an argument seems much more difficult to do and therefore to capture in writing. An argument, for our purposes, is an attempt to convince an

audience through reasoning and evidence. We realize, of course, that there are political and social arguments that do not follow our definition.

An argument based on reason follows a logical order of things. A reasonable argument might look like this:

A parent has the right to choose any school beneficial for his or her child.
I am the parent of this child.
Therefore, I can choose this beneficial school for my child.

The key to winning an argument is usually in the first assumption. Here I would have to show evidence that in the United States a parent has the right to choose any school. I also have to define and demonstrate what I mean by beneficial for my child. But from a student's point of view, the key to understanding the argument is to grasp its basic framework: the premise, the relationship, the logical conclusion.

The premise: A parent has the right to choose any school beneficial to his or her child.
The relationship: I am the parent of this child.
Logical conclusion: I can choose this beneficial school for my child.

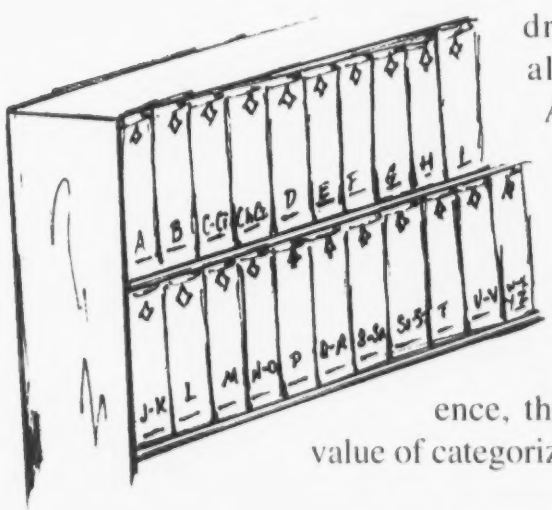
With that framework in mind, your student can remember the argument. If the student disagrees with the conclusion, he probably has a disagreement with the evidence that supports the premise. At least he knows where to look to counteract the argument if he does disagree.

2.3 Skills in locating information

Using libraries, the Internet, and reference sources

It is often suggested that successful people in the information age will be able to find information and use it efficiently. Information is king. Knowing where and how to find information quickly will separate the haves from the have-nots.

Basic skills. All the more reason, then, for us to make information searching an important skill for the self-directed learner. If asking targeted questions is important to critical thinking, it is equally important to know where and how to locate information that helps answer the questions. The library and reference books are still major resources in resolving information questions. It makes sense, therefore, to give students practice in finding information in a school or public library and in using dictionaries, encyclopedias, indexes, and books of lists. Trivia games and question and answer routines at home create perfect opportunities to make use of these references and to explain their organization.



For young children, start with alphabetical order. Almost every reference activity is based first on placing things in alphabetical order. As children gain more experience, they will realize the value of categorizing information,

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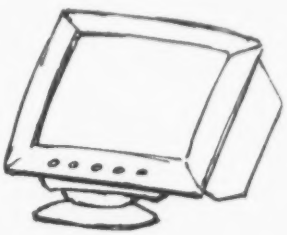
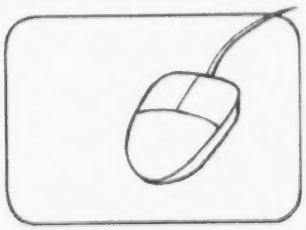
and of looking for information based on the central concepts that stand at the center of the search. If the student is trying to find out the differences between a sloop and a square-masted vessel, where is he likely to find what those differences are? Since they are both sailing ships, he is more likely to find an explanation under *sailing ships* than he is under the individual names of the vessels.

Without doubt, of course, the Internet has become a fascinating storehouse of information. For the modern student, knowing how to surf the Internet to find various kinds of information is a key to participating in the information jobs of the future. Schools and libraries offer courses in using the Internet to locate information. Because many of the sites on the Internet are interactive, most children will gladly use it as a primary source of the kinds of information they need.



Guiding Students: Refining questions

When you use one of the electronic search engines, it helps greatly to make your question as precise as you can. If you were to search the ERIC education database, for example, you might get tens of thousands of references to a question as broad as: "How to teach reading?" But if you asked the question you are actually interested in: "What are ways to teach phonics in grade one?" the number of references would be limited to a couple of



hundred. With the more precise question: "What are the ways to teach phonemic awareness in the early first grade?" you would reduce the number of articles to under one hundred. That may still seem overwhelming, but you can see that you started with an unmanageable list with the first question and moved to one that seems workable. In searching for answers, help children refine their questions so they can reach an answer in an efficient way.

Most students are inclined to ask broad, general questions. Through your guidance and much practice children will learn to move closer and closer to the exact information they want. Lead them to be as specific as they can by thinking in the following manner:

General	*car*
Define type	*family (or sports car)*
Specific	*minivan*
Name example	*Caravan*

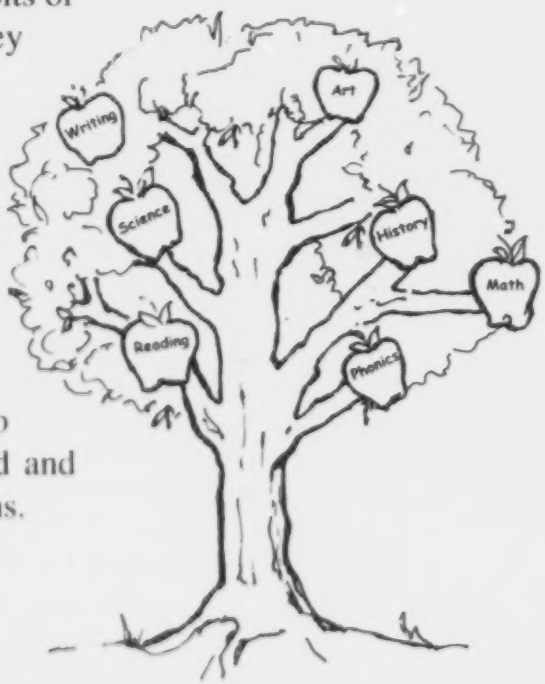
The closer the student can come to having a specific image, the more likely she will locate the exact information she is seeking; for example, "How much will this minivan cost my family?"

Encourage students to take courses and workshops on how to find information because they will likely spend the rest of their lives using these basic skills to solve work problems and to find what they need for their personal lives.

3. Knowledge that supports growth

We learn all the time. In our self-directed learner curriculum, however, we want to pay particular attention to the knowledge that supports students throughout their lives, knowledge that enables them to think about the physical world, the relationships of people, and the artistic and spiritual ideas that support human existence. Across the elementary and secondary school years this knowledge grows in its breadth and depth. It grows through subjects likes math, science, history, sociology, art, literature, psychology, philosophy, and so on.

In the early years, school subjects are concerned not only with knowledge or information but also with ways of thinking. In a sense, we want our children to learn to think like mathematicians, like scientists, like historians. In that way, young students begin to learn more than facts, more than bits of information. They begin to learn about the structure of the subject and to understand the operations that enable adults to figure out the theories used to explain the world and human interactions.



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3.1 Math and science structures and operations

Basic skills. Most of us think of math as counting, measuring, and learning facts about a base-10 system: 5-10-15-20-25 and so on. Those facts enable us to count, measure, construct equations, and conduct ourselves in our commercial world. But math also helps us think about predictable arrangements and relationships. Thus we set up mathematical statements in terms of a predictable outcome: $x + y = z$.

Science, too, searches for theories that help us understand and predict occurrences in the physical world. What holds the planets in their orbits? How does animal life carry forward traits we can trace from one generation to the next? What structures hold all material together? These kinds of questions about the structure of life and material are why we ask children to examine health, growth, reproduction, and the names of elements that we identify in chemistry, physics, and biology.

Guiding the learner

As in all fields of endeavor, basic information is needed to view and discuss the phenomena in the world around us. In addition to helping them learn the facts of the week, we need to prod them to think about the broader context. This is done at all levels of education by asking the student to give examples of how his or her learning can be applied. "Can you think of ways that you can use this information?"

From that point, ask the student to think of questions that are based on the facts that she already knows. Squirrels eat and digest food. Do all animals function in the same way? When I throw a rubber ball against a wall, it bounces back. Will all objects do that?

3.2 Historical themes and theories

Basic content. The major ideas students need to understand society and its history are not isolated facts and dates. There *are* major events across time that have a significant impact, but that's not where learners should focus their attention. For their long-term benefit, we want them to have an understanding of the development of society and the forces that seem to move people.

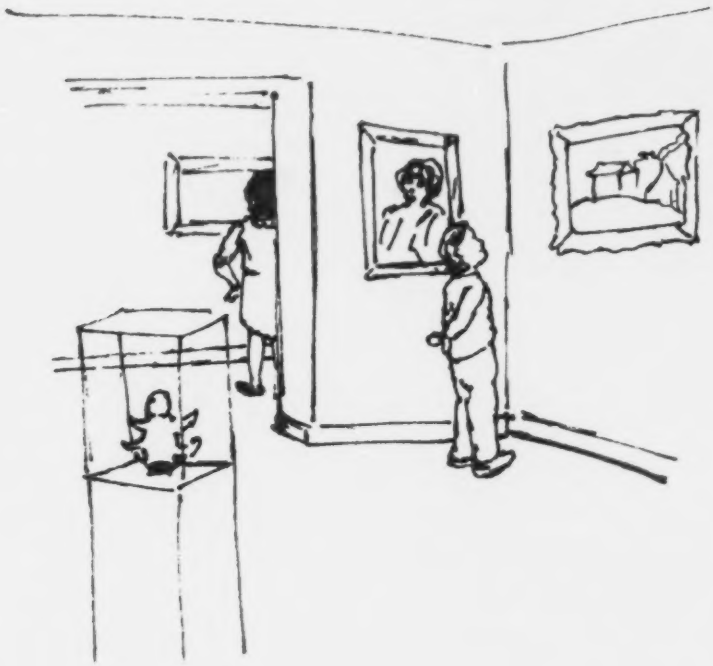
The fact that Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock in the New World creates an interesting image in the development of the United States, but the event signifies a movement among religious adventurers that brought hundreds of thousands of people here. The search for a place where they could practice their religious beliefs freely led various groups of religious people to establish a colony in the New World. Knowing this enables the self-directed learner to pursue the question: Are there other large movements of people who have moved for religious purposes? And of course, the answer is yes.

Though many theories try to account for the development of societies and governments, we want to present these ideas in a way that helps students comprehend them at their current stage of development. In the Western world, for example, we refer to Biblical times, referring to the centuries before Jesus Christ, centuries during which religious beliefs dominated the lives of the people and the organization of government. Parallel to the Biblical times of the Jewish people, there were similar developments in the Muslim world. Because the Bible narrative is quite familiar to many students, it serves as a platform from which a major theme can be developed: *Religion has had a major influence on the organization and movement of cultures.*

Besides religion, other themes that can be used in the study of society and government include: the search for resources, especially food; the development of nation-states; the building of empires such as the Roman Empire; the search for individual freedom and the rise of democratic governments; and so on. As students become more sophisticated thinkers, more complex theories can be explored.

Guiding the learner

By helping students organize history and government in a coherent manner, we prompt them to think about patterns of events. After examining the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, for example, we can encourage our students to keep that example in mind as we look at other periods of time: Is there a pattern to empire building? What are the benefits and the pitfalls of being part of an empire?



3.3 Artistic movements and events

Basic content. Some current ideas about art extol almost everything anyone lays out as a work of art if the producer calls it art. This might make young students think that studying art is a futile exercise. Yet art has been identified and coveted throughout history. In fact, some works of art are so powerful that generation after generation stand in awe at the sight or the sound of the work. Michelangelo's *Pieta* and Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* are just two examples of awe-inspiring works.

If individuals and institutions constantly search for art and music that lifts them and pulls them towards their destinies, every student deserves the opportunity to explore recognized art and the motivation behind those works. The same is true for the major movements in the arts that gave us a body of admired work. In that way, the self-directed learner can have a better understanding of the value in primitive art, religious art, government art, schools of art that develop particular techniques, representational art, and symbolic art.

Guiding the learner

Beyond the recognition of names such as Picasso, Renoir, Rodin, Mozart, Puccini, and the like, we want to prompt the learner to ask continually: "What constitutes enduring art? What does art contribute to my life and to the life of the people around me?"

3.4 Psychological and spiritual movements

Basic content. In the past thirty years, more and more people have expressed a yearning for a spiritual life. Tired and bored with excessive materialism, many Americans have turned to religion, meditation, yoga, and other means of seeking inner peace. This yearning, though a surprise to some, is nothing new.

Religion has certainly played a dominant role in the development of Western culture. The Christian religions particularly have influenced law, philosophies, social mores, and therefore the thinking patterns of major segments of Western society. A similar statement could be made about sections of the world where the Muslim religion or the Hindu religion dominates.

Especially in the past two centuries, the study of the mind and of the mind-body relationship has given rise to numerous theories, movements, and cults that work to achieve balance or peace of mind. From the analysis of dreams to the power of positive thinking, these theories and techniques have produced hundreds of textbooks and self-help books. Various schools of psychoanalysis and behavioral sciences are available for study by the self-directed learner.

Guiding the learner

Remind students that the yearnings for peace and the religious beliefs of family, friends, and students themselves can be understood better with the study of some of the major spiritual and psychological movements. Each movement gives their followers a set of rules or guidelines that help them make decisions and help give them a sense of peace. They may want to ask themselves how they would choose a religion or a system of beliefs that will guide them in their life decisions.

4. Personal Narratives

Narratives or stories seem to be our best way to explain the world to ourselves and to others. In this section, each type of narrative asks students to think creatively about an aspect of learning and of life. Each effort expands the student's sense of literature's aesthetic and communicative values. We are not asking children to concoct fairy tales about human life and the universe. We are asking them to utilize personal narratives as a mechanism for revealing truth in their current state of development and understanding.

4.1 Stories that explain personal life

Basic concept. From the earliest times people have gathered to tell their stories. Some stories were simply to entertain; we call that fiction. But many were a way to explain life and the way the world works.

Most people tell stories daily—how they won a game, the drama of a car crash, how they were hurt in a relationship. Everyone, children included, needs to tell stories that relate or explain their personal lives. Constructing a story with a setting, lifelike characters, motivation, plot, and a resolution helps students give dynamic perspective to their lives.

Guiding the learner

As a regular practice, ask students to search their hearts for an issue, a question, a hope. Using it as a starting point, students can construct a story that tries to work on this issue through the characters in their story.

Can they find a moral in the story? Can they find inspiration to become better than before? Can they find hope for tomorrow? Through this process, children think about life and appreciate the art and power of literature.

4.2 Stories that explain history

Basic concepts. Whether writing about a particular event, like the battle of Bull Run, or about an entire period, such as the Civil War, a story gives the student a chance to explain to himself the meaning of what took place. "What were the forces that brought the North and the South into bitter conflict, a conflict that destroyed more American lives than any other war we have fought? How can I express those forces in a story?"

History lends itself to storytelling because historical events always involve setting, contentious characters, motivation, a plot (though sometimes vague), and an outcome (resolution). The resolution may be seen years after the fact, but it is there for a student of history to incorporate into her story.

Guiding the learner

A long-running television show was called "You Are There." It was an attempt to recreate some famous event in order to give the modern viewer a chance to listen to the characters lead up to and carry out the event. Ask your young student to pretend that he is present at the time in history that is under discussion. He can then tell the story as he understands it.

These narratives do not change history, but they may help students give meaning to the past and some preventive guidance for the future.

4.3 Stories that weave together the events of spirit and experience

Basic concept. All learners need the opportunity to explain phenomena they don't understand. Consider the ancient myths that used stories to explain the arrangement of the stars. Stars seen with the naked eye were given names, names that we still use: Leo the lion, Orion the hunter, the Big Dipper, and so on. The ancients could not explain what they saw in the sky, so they constructed stories to give meaning to what they saw.

In numerous ways we are all confronted by things we do not understand immediately. How do we explain the premonitions that some people have that are subsequently fulfilled in actual events? How do we account for people who pray for a cure to a deadly disease, and they experience an instant cure? How do we describe the conversion of a hardened criminal into a compassionate worker for social justice? Either we shrug off those types of events with a vague, "I don't know and I don't care" or we construct our own story based on our beliefs or our current, inadequate knowledge.

Guiding the learner

- Do we want our children to shrug their shoulders at every mystery? Or do we want them to wrestle with the mysterious and think about alternative answers? These situations pose excellent opportunities to use stories to describe and explain these types of experiences.

In writing stories, encourage children to let characters speak about alternatives, and to let the emotions of the characters decide how the story ends. In this way, the students do not have to argue the logic or the science or the spirituality of a solution. Their characters do that job for them.

4.4 Stories that reflect respect, responsibility, and values

When we are young, we see how our parents care for other people, and we listen to their statements about their friends and their co-workers. Most likely we adopt those attitudes as our own. Our sense of respect and responsibility may also be influenced by religious beliefs and teachers and classmates. But without a doubt, our immediate family sets the early tone of how we honor people and accept responsibility for our own actions.

As we mature and our contacts expand, we realize we make numerous decisions about ourselves and other people. Some of these decisions may cause us to rethink the early guidelines we used in our previous years.

Either through reflection (reliving events in our lives) or through projection (rehearsing future events), we tell ourselves stories about how to handle the problems of everyday life. Through that storytelling process we also work out a value system that undergirds our decision making.

Fables and fairy tales are examples of stories that usually deliver a message about good and bad behavior, among other things. The well-known story of the race between the tortoise and the hare is a prime example of a morality tale that makes fun of the arrogance of the rabbit while praising the persistence of the turtle.

To implement this idea in school, children may be asked to write a story that resolves some conflict. For instance, as a story starter a teacher describes a scene in which one small group of children tries to exclude a child from their group. They call him insulting names in their attempt to drive him away. The class is then asked to write an ending that finishes the story.

After completing their stories, children can reflect on what their conclusion means. What messages would their particular story send about how children should treat people, about peer pressure, about the values one needs to work out this common problem.

Guiding the learner

Unless a child volunteers, the classroom teacher should not ask for a public statement of personal values. This type of narrative, however, creates an opportunity for children to see their value system reflected in the ways they solve real-life problems. It gives children a chance to ask who the misguided characters are, who the good guys are—and why.

When a second grader writes about helping a physically handicapped pal participate in a baseball game, he shows that he respects the need of all children to feel part of class activities. When a fourth grader describes a girl's struggles to carry out her school assignments during troubled times at home, she reflects her sense of responsibility to home and to school. When a seventh grader tells a story about a girl dared by her peers to use drugs, she shows through her character's responses how she relies on her values to ward off attacks on her integrity.

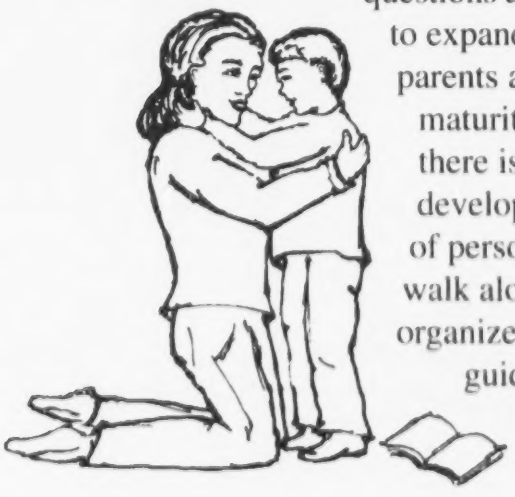
Since all of us face challenges to our integrity, writing stories not only helps us clarify personal issues but also gives us a chance to practice respect, responsibility, and the values to which we are committed.

Conclusion

We have spent most of our time discussing attitudes and thinking skills. But attitudes and thinking skills are not developed without content. They are formed and refined around literature, history, mathematics, sciences, philosophy, and so on. We would not believe that a person was a master carpenter simply because he moved his hand up and down as if hammering. We want to see that person actually build a cabinet or a house. His skill can only be demonstrated with tools on wood in an emerging construction.

So, too, with the learner. Over time the learner develops reading skills and demonstrates them by reading and solving the problems posed in math and science books. The learner's positive attitudes are revealed through choices and through a sense of direction in building knowledge and in refining his thought processes.

Alongside the learner are parents and teachers who guide and encourage, who ask thought-provoking questions and challenge the learner to expand his knowledge. These parents and teachers have the maturity to understand that there is a spiral flow to the development of knowledge and of personality. Therefore they walk alongside their children to organize experiences and to guide them as they strive to become purposeful, responsible learners.



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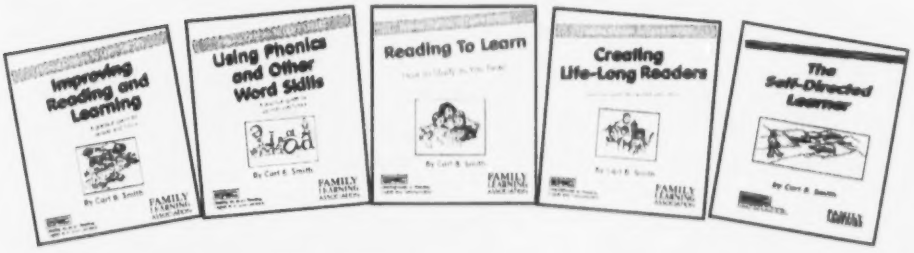

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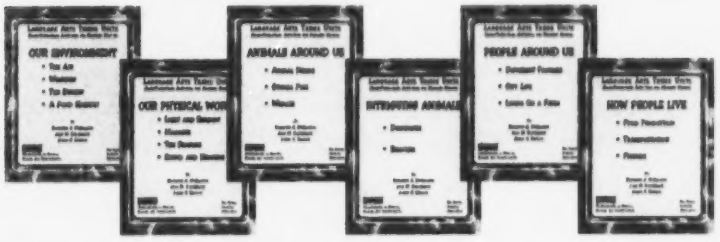

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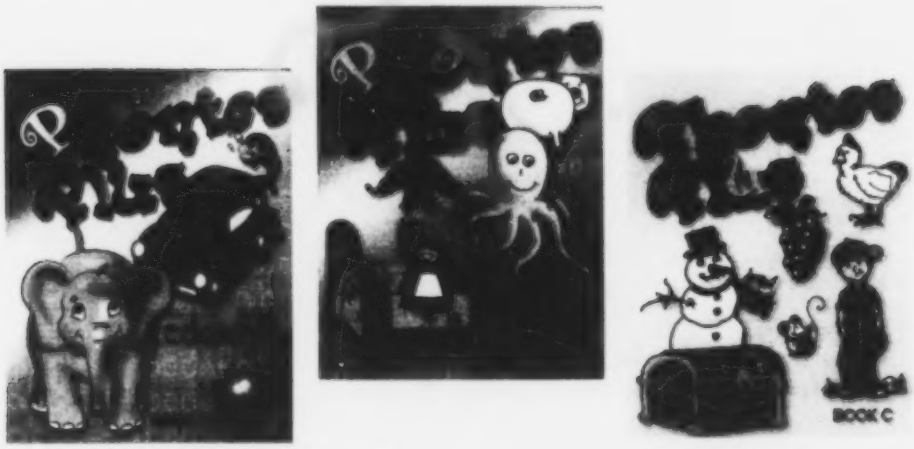

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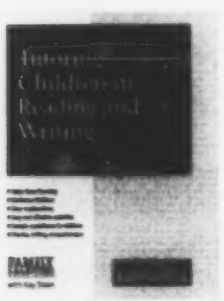
These three books help children learn to discriminate sound-symbol correspondences by listening, saying, seeing, and then writing patterns, sentences, and stories. Book A is appropriate for kindergartners and first-graders. Book B is for grades 1–2, and Book C is for grades 2–3.



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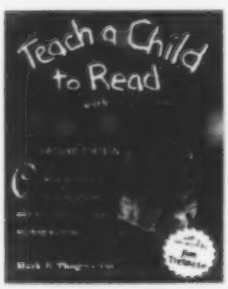

Teach a Child to Read with Children's Books

Written specifically for working one-on-one with your child, this book offers an enjoyable integrated approach to learning to read. Learn how to prepare your child for reading lessons, how to use books to promote learning, and how to use writing and phonics to enhance your child's progress.

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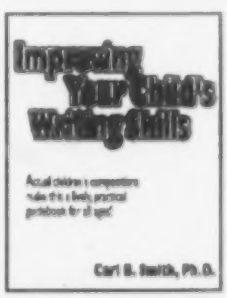

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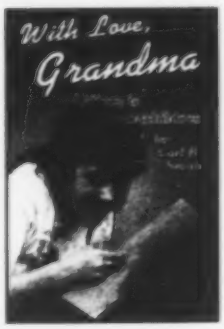
And especially for Grandparents!!

Grandma & Grandpa, May I Come Over? *by Marian Brovero*

When they visit, grandchildren want to DO things. This book presents 52 different activities for each week of the year that are easy and inexpensive, and range from planting a seed, to visiting a horse, to dusting the bookshelves! The large-print format and original artwork make this a perfect gift. Ms. Brovero used her own grandchildren to test, refine, and "kid-certify" that all these activities are both educational and enjoyable.

With Love, Grandma *by Carl B. Smith*



This collection of sample letters and books to share is full of whimsical illustrations and drawings by children. The book will enlighten grandparents about what to write to their grandkids. Subjects include holidays, family, the seasons, and school, as well as developmental charts, a list of resources, and essays by Claude Pepper, and Bob Keeshan (aka Captain Kangaroo).

Gotcha, Grandpa *by Carl B. Smith*

This collection of letters and discussions for grandchildren explores more serious topics: self-esteem, goals, persistence, young and old together, heroes, and much more. Each subject is accompanied by actual letters from seniors, as well as age-specific books for sharing. Dr. Lee Salk and Barbara Kupetz contribute essays on the benefits both the young and old derive from cross-generational communication.

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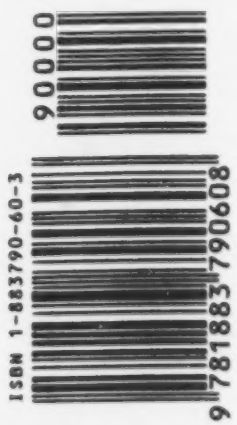

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